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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000481

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NLD LEADERS IN A "WAIT AND SEE" MOOD

REF: RANGOON 472

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (S) Summary: During our April 19 visit to re-opened NLD headquarters, recently released Chairman U Aung Shwe played down press reports that he believes ASSK's release is imminent and denied rumors of a meeting between top SPDC and NLD leaders, but acknowledged that the regime had allowed him and other detained CEC members to meet with ASSK in mid-March. The released NLD leaders told us they believe their party has some leverage vis-a-vis the regime's reconvening of the National Convention, but that they will wait and see what develops in the coming weeks. The release of U Aung Shwe and NLD Secretary U Lwin, and the reopening of party headquarters, has given the party a visible morale boost, but the pro-democracy movement will remain hobbled until the release of ASSK and U Tin Oo and the re-opening of all NLD party offices. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On April 19, COM and P/E Chief called on NLD Chairman U Aung Shwe and Secretary U Lwin, both released on April 13 after spending over ten months under house arrest. We met at NLD headquarters in central Rangoon, re-opened on April 17, where about a hundred NLD party members were busy cleaning musty offices and fielding questions from international media stringers. NLD CEC member U Nyunt Wei, released last November, also joined the one-hour meeting.

3. (C) U Aung Shwe, quoted earlier in the day in international press reports as expecting the release of Aung San Suu Kyi "within one or two days," told us with a smile that he had no specific information regarding ASSK's status, but said that he and his colleagues remained "ever hopeful" that she and NLD Vice Chairman U Tin Oo would be released soon.

4. (S) We asked the NLD leaders about fresh rumors that the detained NLD top leadership (ASSK, U Tin Oo, U Aung Shwe, and U Lwin) had met in March with SPDC Chairman Than Shwe, PM General Khin Nyunt, and other top regime leaders. U Aung Shwe acknowledged that the four NLD party leaders held a brief meeting among themselves to discuss party business in mid-March, but denied that there had been any contact with the SPDC generals. He demurred on discussing the content of the NLD meeting or identifying the location, describing their talks as "secret," and said he had no idea why the SPDC had allowed the detained party leaders an opportunity to meet.

5. (C) The CEC members agreed with COM's observation that the SPDC had issued invitations to some NLD members to attend the reconvened National Convention to give the regime at least a limited ability to claim it was being "inclusive" and blame the NLD for a failed process should the leading opposition party choose to boycott. U Lwin said that in 1995, after his party departed the Convention, the regime stated that it "could do anything without the NLD." In reality, he added, they were unable to move ahead without the NLD and the Convention collapsed shortly thereafter. "We have some leverage," said U Aung Shwe, "but we will wait and see what develops in the coming weeks."

6. (C) The NLD leaders said that they believed about 30 NLD members had received direct invitations to attend the reconvened Convention. (Note: The NLD was allotted 86 delegates to the 1993 Convention, plus an additional five party representatives. End Note) They said no NLD member would act on their invitation (and U Aung Shwe said he had even refused to take receipt of his invitation from a military intelligence courier), but allowed that the regime might be able to persuade four former NLD party members, dismissed by party leaders, to attend the Convention under the NLD banner.

7. (C) U Lwin said that the NLD insists that the SPDC address the significant shortcomings of the aborted 1993-1996 National Convention before giving serious consideration to participating in a renewed Convention. U Nyunt Wei added that the Burmese people would not blame the NLD for a stalled process. "Our people won't be duped," he said "the generals are obviously moving toward a constitutional dictatorship and their road map is nonsense and nothing more than eyewash."

8. (C) U Aung Shwe said that U.S. sanctions "have been very helpful" and U Lwin added that the NLD welcomes recent U.S.

and EU statements drawing attention to their release and other developments regarding the NLD. "Our real task now," added U Nyunt Wei, "is to counter the propaganda of the regime that has Kofi Annan and others in the international community, especially Special Envoy Razali, believing that the generals are serious about a transition to democracy." The NLD leaders described the drafting of a new constitution as a fait accompli and said they were offended that some countries insist the NLD get on the boat or risk missing an opportunity to partake in a transition. "We don't like the captain of the boat," said U Nyunt Wei, "and we don't like the destination."

19. (C) Comment: U Aung Shwe and U Lwin were in very good spirits and fully engaged in rejuvenating NLD activities at party headquarters. U Aung Shwe, who at age 86 is the eldest of the CEC members, appeared to be in robust health while 80 year-old U Lwin, who suffered a stroke in the mid-1990s, was frail but was deftly handling a spontaneous press conference when we arrived. Although their release, and the opening of party headquarters, has given the party a visible boost of much needed morale, we suspect that the pro-democracy movement will remain hobbled until the release of ASSK and U Tin Oo and the re-opening of all party offices. End Comment.

Martinez